

The Two Kings

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The Two Kings

by [EmilyElm](#)

Summary

Ugly family issues rear up as Galahad comes of age to take up his quest for the Grail at the castle of Two Kings. The pressure of his purity and his need to be perfect only antagonize a hopeless situation with Tristan. How can he heal a wasteland if he is not true to himself?

Notes

For Tristahad week, as I fell in love with Knights in the books (the movie was tough, but it had a certain cast in it) and now I get a chance to write my version of it.

Tags will be added as the chapters are posted. Please let me know if I missed anything that needs to be flagged.

You can find me at hanfangrahamk on Tumblr.

Out of the Mists of Avalon

The mists from Avalon drift over the sea and clear long enough for Galahad to see where he is.

Before him, a bluff high above a roiling sea; below him, the verdant clover that serves as a thick ground cover. It is a paradise, but a false one, as a seer appears at his side, different from the other wizards introduced to him. He has a snout and horns poking from it.

The seer takes his hand and traces the lines along his palm with a claw. The lines are etched deep and long, and for a moment, Galahad glances up at the seer, quizzical.

He yanks his hand back as he regards the seer as a sow. They are standing on the edge of bluff, the sow on two legs. Galahad takes a cautious step back, pulling his hands away.

“You are the illegitimate son of Lancelot,” the sow tells him, as if this is a curse. This from a pig. Who has called him a bastard.

“I know I’m a bastard,” Galahad spits out, his hands folding into tight fists. Anyone who knows him never fails to remind him of this fact. His current circumstances – finding himself stuck in a nightmare -- scream of the tragic event of his birth.

The pig tries to soothe him by telling him about evidence he’s never heard before of Lancelot. “Galahad” is his father’s original name he was given at birth, but the name was changed when he was but a child. The son of Lancelot will surpass his father in valor, and Galahad will return the Grail to his maternal grandfather, Frederick.

Galahad, rather than trust his own ears, insists he is sleepwalking. Since he was as young as six, his dreams have been fantastical. In his dream phase, he has travelled from cloud to cloud, reaching distant lands. He’s flown to the moon to look out at the sun and the stars. This dream, however, is strange to him.

This pig is saying the meaning of his name is the same as Lancelot's true name. Galahad has heard mention of this, but he's had his doubts. Now, the truth washes over him with a conviction that seems undeniable. And the sow is not finished spilling secrets. Its lips are moving and sharing another name. The name of his beloved. Who will bring him to the castle on the lake where the Holy Grail awaits.

The name catches the mist that rolls off the sea and over the coastline. He can't hear it for the crash of the waves. And the trees are rustling with the sound too.

"They will come for you, Galahad," the pig presses him forward, "but only one man is the gatekeeper. Pa gur yv y porthaur?"

"What man is the gatekeeper?" Galahad translates the native Welsh, desperate to hear the name, knowing his life depends on it, but he's not fast enough for Twrch Trwyth (how did he know the pig's name suddenly?).

Twrch Trwyth is suddenly out of reach, remaining on the bluff's edge, its snout nudging at the eroding earth. The sea breeze is pushing him towards the woods where the trees are known to walk among man.

And like the magic in his dreams, he begins to float through the hemlock grove, its thick branches bending in the direction of the wind. Like the boughs, he bends too and closes his eyes to the sensation of the trees walking and talking with him. Their branches tickling his nose as he sways with them.

"Tristan," the trees whisper. "Tristan..."

And then Galahad sees him.

A dying knight, his long hair shielding his face, is speared on the trunk of the hemlock that lords over the center of the forest. Its poison exposes the veins spider-webbing along his face and blooms like lilac under the canopy of long hair.

Galahad smiles at the knight, brushing back thick braids. His touch makes the man shudder. Galahad is drawn to his face and leans down to caress his grey cheeks and his bluish lips. The knight can barely open his eyes, but his eyelids flutter as Galahad draws his lips over his. Galahad's kiss sends his heart pounding and his eyes snap open.

Mirth dances in Galahad's eyes before he notices that the knight has awakened. He is the giver and taker of life, it would seem. A god among men.

As the knight fumbles to the ground, Galahad stumbles back, frightened. The knight wrenches himself from the stakes of the tree and rises to his feet, clearly alive and breathing again. He bows at Galahad's feet and kisses the earth he walked on. He brings his eyes up to meet Galahad's. Even the trees come to a standstill, watching the knight's next move.

Galahad takes in the sight of the knight pledging his allegiance to him, as if he were some king. The knight clutches at his boots, climbing up his legs, until his arms wrap around his waist, his head resting in the curve of his hips. Chest heaving, Galahad tries to back out of this embrace, the contact overwhelming to him.

Galahad's hand flies up to his mouth, his delayed reaction to kissing a man suddenly hitting him full force, and he forces out a long breath, screaming for help, for his father, Lancelot, to come.

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Galahad gasps, Lancelot's name lingering on his lips, eyes flying open to his familiar room. Snow falls outside his frosted window. He reaches for his robe and wraps it loosely at his waist.

He walks at a fast clip through the convent, ducking any eye contact from the maidens who cross his path. He is a man now, among virtuous women, and despite his aunt's protection, it is time to return to the home of his mother. He is eighteen and has rudely been told he may as well be a babe in the henhouse. At first he was offended that someone would question his chastity. And then he realized that the nuns' virtue was being called into question. Each time, the thought gives him pause.

Despite his seclusion here, he is learning how difficult it is to remain pure in a wicked world. At thirteen, he was told about his mother's seduction of Lancelot and that he was born to bring the quest of the Holy Grail to King Arthur. Only the pure could undertake such a quest. Galahad was tormented that he would not be accepted by the King and his famous court. But he could not bring himself to sabotage his life and fall between the legs of some wench to never know if he would truly belong.

He reaches the chapel and closes his eyes as he plants his knees against the cold stone floor. His eyes dart underneath his lids, still alarmed by the twists and turns of his dream. How could his kiss save his dying knight? And why did this knight feel like his beloved? What was the name the trees whispered to him?

Hours pass, and luckily, his aunt enters the chapel and pulls him to his feet. His legs have long fallen asleep. His mind, as ever, is alight and his thoughts are particularly worrisome. Impure. Immoral. Tasteless. He is not the man he has been raised to become.

He sinks into Bedelia's arms, unsteady on his feet. He can feel his legs again, as invisible needles prick his nerves. A sheen of sweat beads along his face, dampening his curls to his forehead.

"T'is time," Bedelia states simply.

Galahad never wanted to leave like this. He would have been content to live among the maidens and taken his nightwalks among the clouds. Yes, he's friendless. And this convent lacks monsters and swears off the magic that roams these lands. But hiding here has to be better than what awaits him out there. This he's sure of.

*

Only Bedelia knows the way to her sister Elaine's castle. Elaine had worried if she knew where her only son was kept, she'd seek him out before his time had come.

As their horses race through the snow-covered woods towards his future, Galahad drifts back to the past, returning to the Cornwall where bears and big cats roam among the witches and

dog-heads. His mother promised to protect him against these monsters, but she could not say the same for the man he knew as his father, Eliazer.

Eliazer and Elaine constantly fought. Their son was not his. Elaine willingly asked the wizard Merlin to magically weave her way into Lancelot's bed so she could seduce him into believing she was his wife, knowing her beauty would captivate and entrance the Knight. But she had to live with the consequences of deceptive magic. Yes, she bore his son, but she, too, was betrothed to another. And Eliazer was most displeased by her infidelity.

Only the new god from Rome was spoken with more frequency than Eliazer's use of "whore" whenever his gaze fell on Elaine. As Elaine weaned Galahad off the breast, Eliazer could only regard the toddler with stony silence. The silence became more and more frightening as time went on.

But Eliazer spoke to him once. The moon was so round and bright it filled the night sky, and in a fit of whimsy, Eliazer took the heavy babe out to look at it. He pointed so Galahad would look upon the stars in the night sky and told him to find the New God there. Even if Galahad wasn't loved in this cold world, something believed in him or his feet would not be planted here. Someone above loved him enough to guide his steps as long as he walked upon the earth. And that was the last he spoke to Galahad, blessing him with the secret to bearing a lonely life, before the child was taken to parts unknown.

Bedelia, who was just as beautiful as Elaine and who had any number of suitors, had fallen under the spell of the Roman god and desired to become one of his virgin brides. To baptize a child in His name would only increase her devotion in His eyes. She gladly lifted young Galahad out of her sister's house of strife.

Bedelia was devoted to her faith and so grew annoyed by the child who pulled her out of the chapel. In these times, Galahad would hear often about how she could not wait to return him to Elaine when he turned 18. Her resentment and coldness towards him did not keep her from the other promise she made to Elaine – to raise him to be a pure man and a fine warrior, known as the greatest knight in the world. The knight prophesied to achieve the Grail and heal the Wasteland.

Like anything to do with the Saxons and Brittonum, family ties complicated the prophecy. One day, she would have to tell Galahad of the family shame about his grandfather, Frederick, and how he engineered Galahad's birth, basically using his own daughter to bring

the Grail back to Chilton Castle. She was not looking out for her sister's child or doing a good deed for her God. She was protecting her family's legacy by ensuring Galahad would be selected to go to the Grail Castle and heal the Broken King.

The Broken King is the wounded guardian of the Grail and is related to Frederick. Incapable of performing his tasks on his own, his kingdom suffers. His thigh wound makes him impotent and his inability to produce an heir affects his land and reduces it to a barren wasteland. Knights come from many lands to heal the King, but only the chosen one, who can correctly ask the healing question that can only come to one who is pure, can accomplish the feat. Frederick's bloodline is also wounded by their failings by virtue of their shared bloodline. By bringing the Grail home to Chilton, his hope is that the next generation will continue on and peace would rule the land once again.

Pulling herself out of her prayer book, Bedelia met her charge out in the roundabout where they spar with swords. She was the youngest of her father's brood and he had never had sons. Young Bedelia had shown interest in the swordfights when Frederick took her to market and she always accompanied him to the duels throughout his kingdom. He never refused her sword lessons, even when her body began to bud into a girlish figure.

And so Bedelia was able to train Galahad to be a great fighter. Her discipline and skill were unrivaled, and along the way, Galahad also gained insight into reading people and what drove them to the decisions they made. He became convinced that Bedelia's biggest drive was her grief. Her father, his grandfather, Frederick, was her first true love, as most fathers were to their daughters, and he had been her bedrock. Galahad heard how Frederick fought to put her in school when girls were not expected to go and told her she could do anything a man could do.

Her relationship with her father was the opposite of his experience, and Galahad drank up these stories like a man lost in the desert only to realize how Eliazer could never be a father to him although he was the only one he'd known, and Lancelot, whose name rang out in all the songs and prayers around the land, could not even be bothered to quest for his own son.

Frederick had died shortly before Galahad had been born and Bedelia had grieved beyond the normal mourning period. For years, she believed Frederick was not dead and would return home. When she finally accepted her loss, many thought her sudden conversion to religion was born out of her hopelessness for her father, but in truth, the quest of the Grail came to her in a vision. Frederick's spirit would not rest over the land – indeed, in her own mind – until the Grail was brought back to him. Frederick's blood coursed through Galahad and he served to remind her daily of this vision. Her suitors believed she would stay at the convent for less

than a year and that she would return to Gaul to keep up her father's estate. But she could not return to Frederick's grave empty-handed, and to their surprise, she remained at the convent, raising her nephew for the court of Camelot.

And finally the perfect bubble created around his ideal of Frederick shattered when Bedelia admitted his role in Galahad's birth. For days, Galahad walked among the trees, which rambled with him as far as the mountains. He made it halfway up the slope, alone, before he turned around and headed home.

As Bedelia took him through the thrusts and parries with the sword, Galahad would think about the dragons and giants he would slay at King Arthur's command. He would have to kill alongside his father – men and monsters alike. It scared him that he looked forward to that day. As Lancelot's legend grew, the battle cry was constant. The abandonment and rage Galahad felt inside needed a release, despite how stoic his countrymen were known to be. The battlefield seemed to be the only place he could confront the demons that haunted him.

The sun is setting when they reach the bridge that crosses into an ancient holloway through his parents' land. Frost crunches underfoot and the horses' breath steams in the air. Birdsong filters through the thick roots and canopy of the tree cover lining the dirt trail. Galahad and Bedelia can see the clearing up ahead and a glimpse of the castle in the distance. A greeting party is waiting down the road.

The horses pick up the pace in anticipation. Galahad's heart races too. He sneaks a glance over at Bedelia, who looks every part of the nun, covered in flowing silks and wooden crosses dedicated to her religious union.

Galahad's windblown hair courses over his shoulders and he worries that his simple Roman robe and cape will disappoint next to Arthur's knights' chain mail and armor. It is too late to turn back now. He should have anticipated that Elaine would be ready to claim her fame and glory at the moment of his arrival.

As they pass through the gates to his parents' property, a cemetery rests in the field. Eliazer's name is scratched on a marker, and to his shame, Galahad breathes a sigh of relief. He does not know if he could have faced Eliazer's wrath at this age without there being bloodshed.

Elaine stretches out her arms, overjoyed to lay eyes on her son after all these years. Galahad slows his horse further away from her. He needs time to collect himself. Smooth his hair over, at least. And his thoughts.

Waiting with her are two knights, wearing the crest and arms of King Arthur on their armor. One he recognizes and the other, a stranger. The stranger is too young to be Lancelot. Galahad is disappointed, but not surprised at Lancelot's absence. His father refused to see Elaine after the night he was conceived.

Galahad crouches behind his horse, using the mare as a shield to keep his distance between them. He yanks at his unruly curls to give them some semblance of order on his head when he overhears Gawain muttering to the other knight, "Can you tell whether he's male or female?"

Galahad brushes the coat of his horse to hide his deep embarrassment. How can he be the greatest knight if he doesn't look like one? He has lived among wenches all of his life and he never cut his hair because they didn't. Bedelia was supposed to prepare him for this world. His anger rises, tightening the muscles of his jaw.

With a stiff gait, he walks around his horse and draws himself up next to the knights. Elaine has her arms full of Bedelia and she can wait.

He reaches the knights and hopes that his face is as pale as the Winter landscape and not the burgundy of the famous wines from Listeneise. They greet him as knights do, bowing to one knee, their eyes fixed on the ground, hand on their swords.

Galahad's gaze falls on the familiar one. He remembers the name from the dream now. Tristan. His beloved. He winces at the idea of a man being his true love. Tristan kneels before him, as he did in his dream, his hair (even longer than Galahad's) whipping in the wind, like he too could fly among the stars. There's no denying – Tristan is beautiful. He could not stare at him much longer without casting suspicion. He gestures for them to rise and he ignores Tristan in favor of reassuring Gawain he is, in fact, a man.

"We'll run into trouble if Arthur chooses us to visit the Broken King for the Grail," Galahad regales Gawain with a deep register in his voice. "He holds feasts which no knight may attend but if he bring his wife with him, or his paramour."

Galahad is not as convinced that he sounded as manly as he wanted. Why did he add the “or his paramour”? His chastity cannot be questioned when it is associated with the Grail. He forces himself to listen to the rumors Gawain’s heard about the Broken King Hannibal and the Fisher King, Will. Galahad makes a gallant effort to listen and not dare let his gaze land on Tristan.

Tristan steals several glances at Galahad. Luckily for him, Galahad’s locks curl past his shoulders, long enough that the wind could lift it and it would still hang down his back and over his eyes so he cannot detect the fullness of Tristan’s gaze. He is fair and hairless on his face and chest. His skin is flawless with a hint of a blush along his cheeks. His gaze demure. The color of his eyes are constantly changing so that one could not help but seek his gaze, trying to fix on a grey blue or a green brown. It is vexing and leaves Tristan blushing.

He will put the men on edge. And Geneviere will hate him on sight. Galahad stands as proof of Lancelot’s infidelity, despite the fact that he was tricked and in his heart would never take another.

Lancelot has forgiven the wizard Merlin. Has forgiven Elaine, even. But what would he do when he lays eyes on his beautiful son, his true namesake, pure enough to capture the Grail and put an end to the magic that stubbornly clings around the Wasteland?

Tristan watches as Galahad finally approaches his mother, the mistress to many men even in widowhood. Galahad’s beauty is just as breathtaking as hers. He too could have anyone he desired. No wonder he has been sequestered for so long.

Galahad can feel Tristan’s gaze upon him as he exchanges pleasantries with Elaine. As they embrace, he buries his heated face in her hair. His own mother has noticed the looks the two knights have thrown in each other’s directions. She is the queen of the language of love. She admits to Galahad she does not understand this chastity vow that he took. She had prepared a feast for his arrival, with two milkmaids each to hold his cup and two handmaidens to feed him till he’s satiated. Bedelia now rides ahead to clean up this “mess”. She teases Galahad with a glib “Where’s the fun in that?” He looks aghast.

It sinks in that he’s not merely alarmed, but repulsed. She realizes her mistake in trying to make light of her mistake.

“You are a young man, and only human,” she reminds him. “I am too. And a woman at that.”

His lips have pursed into a thin line. She can’t bring herself to apologize in the English way.

“The problem with our family,” she whispers in Galahad’s ear, “is we love too much. We feel everything as a newborn babe would. This can be perceived as weakness, but I believe it will benefit you in your quest, as it’s benefitted me.”

Galahad looks her fully in her eye. He soaks in the heavy rouge that darkens her cheeks. The bright color of her lips. Bedelia has never done such a thing to her face. Nor would she need to. Men must still be calling upon Elaine's door even at her age.

“I am nothing like you,” he tells her primly. He has all but dismissed her and they share a look, feeling each other’s distress. He girds himself to remain stoic and knightly and to remember his mission. Louder, for the others, he shares his need to escape this world for another: “We’ll ride for King Arthur’s court at first light.”

The Enchanted Battle

Chapter Summary

The heart and magic battle as Galahad meets Tristan and Elaine, the Two Kings Hannibal and Will, and Arthur and Lancelot. After a bloody outcome, Galahad wants to try things his way.

Chapter Notes

Wanted to add a warning for explicit violence and sex. High body count in medieval battle. Dub-con between Will and Hannibal, with Galahad lending a hand with this. Offensive discussion of Hannibal and Bedelia's sexuality and medieval times type cure for impotence. Elaine's use of sexuality at her parties.

The castle doors sweep open and Tristan and Gawain enter, taking in a much calmer scene at the court. Bedelia leads the lords, ladies and various attendants in a bow. The two knights stride forward, Galahad trailing behind, eyes downcast.

Curious gazes follow the young man, absorbing his elfin appearance and delicate hands. Murmurs are already passing through the hall that he does not look like a knight. Or even the son of a knight. Tristan takes in the buzzing around him and is frozen that Gawain seems to be humored by it. By the time Galahad reaches his seat of honor, beside the Queen, he has been summarily dismissed. No one believes that the slight, androgynous, shy man-child can be the One who will seize the Grail and heal the Broken King of his thigh wound to return the Wasteland to its former glory.

A pig has been roasted in Galahad's honor, but Galahad recalls his dream of Twrch Trwyth. It's only fitting that the enchanted boar that had triggered his leaving the convent would, in a way, reappear in its earthly state and be consumed at his homecoming. He can't bring himself to select a piece to put on his plate.

Bedelia snakes through the crowd, searching for a glimpse of her sister. She finds Elaine among her guests, morose. Both Galahad and Elaine refuse to sit at their seats at the head of the feasting tables and the guests mill about in confusion, wondering if they should start eating. Annoyed, Bedelia pulls Galahad aside.

"Your mother doesn't know any other way, Galahad," Bedelia chastises him.

"That's the problem with these courts, being in such a constipated state," Galahad retorts.

“Parents aren’t much better. They make mistakes. Sit down and break bread with her, at least,” Bedelia appeals to reason.

Behind her, Galahad catches a glimpse of the maidens that Bedelia had to chase off. Their eyes widen as they catch sight of him. Their bosoms are only half-covered. Their hair hangs to their waists. Galahad has to look away, cheeks burning.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” Galahad begs off.

He pivots on his heel and approaches Elaine. He makes an excuse about the long journey and having dinner in his room, alone. She looks pained as she agrees he should rest. At that moment, they could have drowned in the leagues of a gulf that had formed between them.

Tristan watches as Galahad disappears from his own homecoming, surprised yet again by the young man's rudeness.

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His room has a draft and the noise from the festivities drifts through, reminding Galahad of his self-imposed isolation. His life is filled with these lonely, drafty rooms. Elaine has Bedelia to keep her company now. Tristan has Gawain. And he can only blame himself. He made the choice to part from the middling crowd and take his stew alone.

He sets his spoon down and considers how ridiculous it is to eat alone when his beloved sits in the hall. The more that he broods on it, the more he knows it’s true. His heart lurched at the sight of him, standing on the road, disappointed that Galahad wouldn't even talk to him. The more he was in Tristan’s presence, his heart continued to swell. He’s never felt this way before, and yet he knows exactly what this feeling is. And now he’s suffering from heartache at their separation. Already, he is dreading and anticipating the moment when he'll feast his eyes on him again. Truth be told, it’s probably for the best that he retired early for bed. He would not have been able to avoid him as the night wore on. He hopes that Tristan has taken a vow of chastity too, so that they may suffer together.

In the few interactions he’s had with other men who have taken the vow of chastity, Galahad has to wonder what cover purity allows them. It certainly feels safer to be alone than to admit to whom he is and is not attracted. And yet his solitude is only making him crave most what he would deny himself. So much for bringing light into the darkness.

And so he sets down his spoon and blows out the candles.

*

After tossing and turning all night, anticipating the dawn, he doesn't know when sleep claims him, but the short rest doesn't refreshen his spirit.

In the dream, the Broken King lies naked except for a loincloth covering his groin, like a feast on a table. The knights who travel from afar line up in their quest to heal the King and take their one chance at asking their healing question. Galahad stands off to the side, watching as they unsheathe their swords, and one by one, failing at asking the correct question, plunge their blade into Hannibal.

Nothing changes.

King Hannibal does not die, nor does his ailment leave him. He cannot maneuver his legs to swing off the table, as he would if he were healed. He remains stuck and maimed, and alive, despite the lack of blood. Galahad is in shock that he does not even flinch from the pain. If Hannibal hadn't sighed briefly after enduring the fourth stabbing, Galahad would believe the King was unfeeling.

Galahad retreats to the corner shadows of the castle, as the sky around the Grail Castle resists full light in the Wasteland. A white-grey fungus clings to the dirt and the trees, killing everything beneath it. The tops of the trees have fallen off and the lack of birdsong and children playing and wenches working is striking. Silence in a castle is nearly unheard of.

In the distance, Galahad sees movement on the lake. The Fisher King makes his way in the twilight to the castle, carrying his catch of the day. Galahad's mouth waters. Even in his dream, he knows he missed dinner and can imagine the meal King Will would prepare for the grail keeper.

And Will does appear behind Galahad, soundlessly, reeking of fish and foul lakewater. They assess each other and then consider King Hannibal.

"You are not like the others," King Will observes. "Where is your sword?"

Galahad looks down. He is in his Roman robes. Even in his dreams, he is not deemed worthy enough by King Arthur to have been knighted. And he is defenseless.

"Who are you?" Will presses, growing alarmed.

"Galahad," replies Galahad, then: "Bastard son of Lancelot and the enchantress Elaine."

"Aye," Will smirks. "A fine pedigree. When I was a young man, I attended the festivities at your mother's house. Her door is always open, and she is an attentive and compassionate hostess... Our King..."

Galahad braces himself for yet another loaded, tawdry description of his mother's orgies and enchanting rituals. He's heard them all and he still has to damp down his flare for anger. Elaine is from another time, he repeats to himself. It is up to his generation to bring his countrymen out of the immoral darkness and into the light of one God.

Will head-nods towards Hannibal, but is pained at the sight of a dozen swords pinning his chest and arms and legs. He looks away and gazes past Galahad. But there's no relief in the view from the castle windows. The Wasteland is yet another reminder of the Hannibal's ache manifesting throughout his kingdom.

“Hannibal once courted Elaine's sister, Bedelia,” Will's lips twist around her name. “She was a fair maiden, with a strong enough disposition to bear sons, and yet, upon meeting him became a nun.”

He shudders, as if absorbing the blow to Hannibal's ego himself. Galahad wants to correct his assumption – that Hannibal somehow turned Bedelia away from the touch of a man – but describing her rejection as an act of faith is not an argument he wants to have at this moment. He has to choose his battles.

And Galahad is curious about Will. King Will, and his relationship to King Hannibal, is a mystery. Will is handsome with his halo of curls and trimmed beard. Distinguished and old enough to be married himself. Yet he is eccentric. He dresses in a short kilt in the Scottish style, implying his allegiance to the Highlands. Galahad had once been fond of the kilts when Arthur first declared that the Welsh and the Celts and the Scots should unite under one nation and one god. Bedelia had allowed him to wear the skirts until visitors to the convent commented on it. But Will does not seem the least concerned by the outdated fashion.

What is apparent is that Will is not young enough to be Hannibal's son. Or favoring enough to be his brother. He carries none of Hannibal's distinct features. And since Will entered the room, Hannibal's eyes have followed his every step and his whole being is attuned to Will's presence. It reminds him of himself and Tristan. How being around Tristan torments him so.

“What are you waiting for?” Will snaps. “Cut his flesh or ask for what you want.”

Harsh times bring out the worst in people. Extreme magic was needed to conquer dragons and wildebeasts and as those predators have been killed off, people had demanded stability. But the powerful became that way because of their knowledge of magic. Most kings pledged allegiance to Arthur to give up the olde ways, but Galahad suspects Will had excellent wizardry skills and charms. He will proceed cautiously with the Fisher King and ducks politely past his imposing figure. Galahad regards King Hannibal, perched on the banquet table like a sword-filled St. Sebastian. He approaches the King and ghosts his fingertips over the flesh of the man. The swords lift out of his body and clatter to the stone floor.

Will watches this in awe. He glances over at Galahad, stunned. Will closes the remaining distance between himself and Hannibal. He runs his hand over the knife wounds, which are quickly healing shut.

“How did you – “ starts Will, before he catches Galahad's eye. “Those wounds are merely superficial. Can you heal the true wound, wizard?”

To Hannibal's horror, Will curls his finger under the loincloth hugging Hannibal's hips. He pulls the wrap free and exposes the man. His hollow thighs are no different from Galahad's own. The wound that is so often spoken of is absent. His thick manhood hangs flaccid and

wrinkled. He is not castrated, as some have whispered. Where is the wound of the Wounded King?

“Maybe it will come alive for you,” Will sneers.

Galahad catches the sight of tears glistening in Hannibal’s eyes before he averts them. Will leans towards cruelty, which clearly comes out of a deep wound of his own. Galahad approaches the table, easing his way next to Will and puts a soothing hand on Will's shoulder. Will is tense, but not ill-at-ease around him completely. He doesn’t shrug off the touch. If Will remains amenable, he wonders how King Hannibal will react to being examined in such a sensitive area.

Galahad knows he has the King’s attention for touching Will. But he hesitates. If he prods and pokes at Hannibal, as clinically as any doctor would, he predicts that Will would gut him as he guts his catch every night. Would he be allowed to leave the Castle knowing the King's secret? Will seems to be considering his next course of action.

“You told me to ask for what I want,” Galahad begins, as nonthreatening as possible. “Why are you still here?”

“You want me to leave my own home,” Will retorts.

“I’m asking why you remain at his side, when he displeases you so,” Galahad expands. “You’re not brothers, you're not his family.”

Will’s mouth flaps open, like a fish. His defensiveness grips his eyes again.

“Will you let me touch your sword?” Galahad presses.

Galahad reaches for the sword under Will’s own kilt. His kilt brushes aside easily, and like most Scots, he doesn’t bother with the loincloth in the Roman style. Galahad fumbles and gropes in his search for Will's knife, but finds something alright. At his touch, Will’s manhood swells and hardens. Will exhales harshly and cries out. His eyes meet Galahad's. He sees what Galahad wants and yet, he doesn't look away. His hand scrambles off Galahad's and pushes down to give it the right pressure, craving his touch, any touch. Will's head tilts back, moaning. His distress grabs Hannibal’s attention.

“What are you doing to him?” Hannibal finally breaks his silence.

Galahad strokes Will, his hand having a mind of its own. He crushes his mouth next to Will’s ear, finding it difficult to breathe. “He needs your release,” Galahad manages to tell him.

“I can’t,” Will shakes his head.

“You know whose cut he wants,” Galahad insists.

“Will,” Hannibal beckons, the desire in his eyes clear for the King to see, “come.”

Galahad shoves Will on top of the table and Will tumbles on top of Hannibal, their limbs entangling, bucking. Their animalistic shouts and groans fill the room, and Will clutches at

Hannibal for balance. Their bodies, wrestling and writhing, intertwine in a final embrace and Will jerks and spasms, unable to stop the tremor that convulses his body.

Will gathers his senses enough to glare over his shoulder at Galahad. This would have never happened if not for Galahad, his look says. If he were not spent, he would kill him.

“Get out,” Will screams at Galahad. “Out, witch.”

And as Galahad flees down the tower steps, as his feet burst onto the dead grass of the Wasteland, he weeps that despite all of his hours upon hours of prayer and solitude, he really is just like his mother.

*

Galahad claws his way to wakefulness, adrenaline and fear making his body slick with sweat. He is gasping for breath after sprinting out of the Grail Castle and landing on pallet of goose feathers and heather. He forces his breathing to slow and his eyes to focus on what is actually in front of him.

He gathers his wits as he tries to remember how he ended up in this unfamiliar room and then catches sight of the spoon and the bowl of stew and it settles him. He is in his mother’s castle.

He crosses to the basin on a side table and dips his entire face in the bowl of water. He pours the rest of the water from the pitcher over his body, to control the heat that threatens to consume it. Finally, he feels stable again.

Outside, a red-tailed hawk screeches as it flies across the rising sun and circles the castle. Galahad wraps his robe around him as he crosses to the window of his tower in time to watch Tristan greet the hawk.

Tristan’s hawk is regal and magnificent, and the care and affection he shows to the bird is something to admire. He reads the slip of parchment tied to the hawk’s claw and glances out at the gathering gray clouds. His features reflect the grim news and the darkening skies as he turns back inside.

Galahad pulls himself away from the window to meet the knights for the day’s ride to Camelot. There, he will meet King Arthur and his father, Lancelot, and hope their graces will not sense the impurity of his dreams and find him unworthy to attend to the business at Grail Castle. With shaky hands, he combs his hair with his fingertips and tries to blot out the image of the two kings coupling in front of him.

A knock at his door stills him. He opens the door to Tristan, and the hawk. Despite himself, Galahad smiles.

“Aye, sire,” Galahad croons at the majestic bird.

Tristan smiles back. It pleases him to find Galahad in a much more agreeable humor.

“I take it you had a good sleep,” Tristan gathers his courage to make a formal introduction.

Galahad tries to place the lyrical nature of his voice, but he has not traveled, even in his dreams, to Tristan’s lands or he would recognize it.

“I never sleep well. Did you?” Galahad asks thickly.

“I was worried that I may have offended you,” Tristan admits. “I was sent in your father’s place. Despite the Winter, the Saxons do not let up in their incursions. I’m Tristan.”

“Galahad.”

The hawk looks between them.

“This is May,” Tristan introduces.

They share an easy laugh that breaks the tension between them. Galahad realizes Tristan does not know about the dream where he kissed him back to life. Nor should he. It was just a dream. May blinks. Galahad will never hear the story of how Tristan was recently considered lost at battle and suddenly reappeared, uninjured and dazed.

“May has brought urgent news of Arthur’s stand at Martin Mere,” Tristan reveals. Galahad has flown often over this lake. The water is such a pure blue that the gods of olde used to bathe in it. “A traitor gave away our position at Bodmin Moor. We won’t be riding to Camelot today, but we must go now.”

Galahad understands and hastily gathers his riding satchels and pulls on his boots. He follows Tristan through the grand halls to the grounds. He looks up at the sky as they approach Gawain, preparing the horses outside the stables.

“A perfect storm,” Gawain observes. And the thunder snow and lightening and rain fall in earnest.

*

The news travels fast that another battle with the Saxons is imminent. The nude revelers from the homecoming party stagger to their feet in the hall, and yank on their robes and wonder if they are to blame for the strife in the land, as the priests accuse them of constantly. They’d forgotten themselves in the drink and the flesh after Galahad had gone to bed.

Bedelia looks askance at Elaine as she finds her in the hall, in the grips of a vicious hangover, her gown barely hanging on her tiny frame. She beckons Elaine to the stables to say her goodbyes, straightening her gown. “He doesn’t want to say goodbye to me,” Elaine snaps at Bedelia. The sisters know this is his way of saying Elaine should have visited him at the

convent. And to avoid asking her what kept her away all those years. Elaine would rather him yell and stomp at her than this silent treatment. Either way he is returning pain for pain. And his silent retreat is par for the course.

She squeezes Bedelia's arm: "Let him go."

But Bedelia won't have it. She rushes to the road and catches sight of the three horses as they sprint out to the holloway. She is given a glimpse of Galahad's profile, one last image of the son she never had but raised, and crosses herself, a silent prayer that St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of travelers, will protect him, now that she no longer can.

Galahad slows when she appears, but he doesn't look back.

*

The road to Martin Mere curves as it leads to the freshwater lake. On this curve, four vultures sit in wait. More circle overhead. Death is near and all but certain for those gathering around the lakeshore.

May gets a firm look-over from the vultures and swoops down to rest on Tristan's arm. Galahad grimaces and forces himself not to glare at the hawk. He can't be jealous of a bird.

The road overlooks the valley and they can see the two opposing forces gathering. Over a thousand Saxons mill about below. No wonder the message demanded they come. Galahad adjusts the Scot-styled armor he had hastily put on this morning. He can tell by the look on Tristan's face that his support for Arthur to unify all the Briton tribes may have gone a step too far. His legs are quite bare as the temperature drops and another front rolls in.

Tristan pulls his horse alongside his, stopping the mare in her tracks.

"What?" Galahad pouts, anxious to join the battle below.

"Have you ever witnessed war before?" Tristan asks.

Gawain looks over his shoulder, waiting for an answer. Galahad narrows his eyes at Tristan. Surely, Elaine told them he'd been cloistered in a convent most of his life.

"You know the answer to that – "

"Fair enough," Tristan nods. Gawain takes hold of Galahad's mare and Tristan practically strong-arms him onto his horse. Galahad tries to protest, but even Gawain won't have it.

"If anything happens to you before King Arthur meets you, it will be our heads," Gawain convinces him to go with it.

And this is how Galahad finds himself galloping into battle sitting on the same horse as Tristan. Tristan is against his back, his arm wrapped around his waist and Galahad has to close his eyes to control himself from throwing his head against Tristan's shoulder and pressing his whole body against him. He keeps his eyes firmly fixed ahead, and lets his bare thighs grip the horse's sides tightly.

They can hear the battle cry sound as the rain sprinkles like a fine mist over the warriors. They are only a few clips out, as the first wave of barbarians attack the British line.

Gawain lets Galahad's mare trail them as they get close enough to see the axes and lances spear limbs and necks. May lifts her wings and sails for the trees, clearly not understanding what horrors men befall on each other.

Gawain and Tristan lead their horses into the battlefield, swords raised. Galahad feels the thrill and dread scorch and speed through his veins. All humanity, it would seem, boils down to blood and brains and bowels. Men piss and shit on themselves before and during their death march. They cry for their mothers. Nothing is sacred or shameful here. And what the men see they will never speak of to someone who does not know the misery of a battlefield.

Galahad raises his sword, the one Bedelia trained him with, and lets his heart race in his throat. He is primed to hack down anyone who comes near him or Tristan.

After his umpteenth kill, his eyes catch Tristan's look. Time seems to wait for them, in this moment. Galahad sees his approval and Tristan sees a boy who has become a man. As Galahad has not disappointed him as a warrior, Tristan is relieved to have him near.

What Galahad does not convey is how badly he wants to walk back to the encircling treeline that is battle-free, and sleep against a trunk for days. Instead, with a look, he indicates he wants to dismount. He's proven he can handle himself in battle. And they have moved and trampled over enough bodies to have a clear view of King Arthur, chopping down the Saxons like so many weeds. Tristan will be absolved of his promise to deliver Galahad if they reach him by foot now.

Staying on the stallion becomes untenable, as the bodies drop around them. Sprays of blood splatter on them, from the giants that roam in their midst. The barbarians have many demons in their ranks, but nothing seems to be able to conquer Arthur and his army.

"Do not leave my side," Tristan shouts over the death rattle and groans around them.

Galahad barely nods. He longs to tell his battle-tested beloved that nothing short of Death or loss of limb would be acceptable for separation, so he remains silent. Tristan repeats himself as he finally caves and their feet hit the bloody and muddy earth.

Tristan slays his way to King Arthur's side and King Arthur gives Galahad the briefest nod of acknowledgement. Galahad and Tristan flank him and they cut and grind and chop their way through wave after wave of bodies. It is a slaughter, it is madness and yet Galahad is soaring as he does in his dreams.

If he were to judge himself, he would sing of the enchantment Elaine had weaved the night away to Martin Mere. Her magic has protected the small, outnumbered band of Brits and Roman legionnaires and made them superhuman against the numerous waves of barbarian Saxon.

At the end of the battle, from the pile of bodies at Arthur's feet alone, close to a thousand Saxons must have been slaughtered. By Galahad's count, 926 in total. And the sun hasn't even set yet.

Galahad determines that the battle songs will fail to mention the magic that protected Arthur and his knights. That is the power of the new religion brought by the Romans. And even Galahad begins to wonder if it's for the best to forget about the unconventional heroes like his mother. If he were honest with himself, he was born to destroy magic. Sure, pockets of demons and creatures will pop up from time to time. But the last remaining holdout for the Kings and wizards to use magic is the Wasteland. If he heals that, then the widespread use and acceptance of magic will be over. Galahad, witnessing how useful Elaine's magic had been, wishes he could take the best from both worlds, the things he likes about magic and the things he likes about the church and present to the Highest that the two could live together. But the church is at war with magic and Arthur has set the course for the church to win.

The Saxon leaders retreat to fight another day when it becomes clear that Arthur has won again. Galahad falls into step with Tristan, following Arthur as the King leaves the lakeshore to the vultures and returns to their camp. Even at camp, Tristan and Galahad do not part ways. Galahad remains at his side as Tristan follows Arthur's orders to collect the rest of the Knights of the Round Table to take count.

The Knights are slowly returning from battle. They are nothing what Galahad expected. They are bloody and injured and prone to human needs of food and sleep. Although a few have yet to return, Arthur is pleased to hear that he did not lose a man and that the warriors didn't lose any vital parts. Arthur is retreating to his tent, exhausted, when Tristan catches him and formally introduces Galahad.

"My King," Galahad murmurs, on bended knee.

Arthur extends his bloodstained hand and Galahad kisses it, staining his lips. Arthur does not signal him to rise immediately. Finally, Galahad looks up and locks eyes with his father, Lancelot. Arthur had waited for Lancelot to join them and Lancelot soaks in the sight his blood-drenched son, as if he'd been reborn and emerged from the womb as a man.

Galahad does not give him a choice in the matter, but remains curled, propped on one knee, as Lancelot holds out his hand for Galahad to kiss. Galahad flattens his lips against the flesh and forces his eyes to land on his father.

"You fought with us, son?" Lancelot greets him.

"Yes," Galahad grits out. What should he call him? They have not even been formally introduced, and yet Galahad knows him by scent alone. "But never again, Father."

He cannot hear Arthur singing his praises as a fighter as his pulse pounds in his ears. He has killed many men today. But he is conflicted on how he wants to continue fighting alongside Lancelot. Arthur sputters to convince Galahad to join them in battle, praising him for not cowering or tiring at Arthur's side. There is no question that Galahad is the One, the knight he's been waiting for. But he is surprised that such a fierce warrior does not want to continue fighting until his enemy is totally destroyed. What other option is there?

And Galahad finds his eyes falling on Tristan when he replies, "Love."

The Witch and the Sword

Chapter Summary

Galahad witnesses the fatal choice that turned King Hannibal's castle into a Wasteland and makes some choices of his own to embrace both sides of himself, the pagan and the righteous, during his knighthood ceremony.

Chapter Notes

Warning of an intense encounter with a witch that ends in a death and spells on dead people. The fish are people. Hannibal is also very violent during his battle scene.

Geneviere and Bors are the last of the inner circle to return to camp, tasked with tending to the injured and the dead. The light and laughter from the campfire near King Arthur's tent lead them to the relocated Round Table.

Boiled potatoes are being plucked from the pot over the fire and the men are blowing on their scalded fingertips and trying to eat at the same time. King Arthur regales the group about the time he broke his fast after being knighted by accidentally eating a golden eagle – he had been that hungry and taken a crossbow to the first animal that he laid eyes on.

Laughter bursts out of the men and Galahad glances uncomfortably over at May, perched behind them on a log. Tristan catches Galahad's glance and breaks out in a grin. They are sitting behind Arthur and Lancelot, in a place of honor for their valor during the battle, and Geneviere does not notice them at first, until she reaches her husband's side.

She stops in her tracks when she takes in the stranger in their midst. All of the talk of being knighted and the unusual sight of Arthur up at such a late hour give her pause. She computes that it's been eighteen years and Lancelot's boy is here, being welcomed as the One Arthur has promised would come one day.

Galahad shrinks under her withering gaze. In the darkness, his hand gropes to steady himself against the log, and he realizes belatedly that he has seized Tristan's hand instead. Tristan looks over at him and lets his hand remain in Galahad's grasp. Galahad has a right to be afraid, even after the battle they had fought. Tristan had predicted Geneviere would hate Galahad on sight, and by all indications, he has been proven right. And Geneviere is just as vicious and handy with a knife as the best of them.

The surprise, for Galahad, is not Genevieve's reaction to him. It's that Tristan has allowed him to continue holding his hand. In the dark, who would see this bit of comfort? Galahad glances at him, relieved, for silently understanding.

"And who is this?" Genevieve asks Lancelot, knowing the answer.

Lancelot rises. He had been so caught up in Arthur's story he hadn't heard Genevieve approach.

"Galahad, my firstborn son," Lancelot introduces. "Galahad -- my wife, Lady Genevieve." Galahad releases his death grip on Tristan's hand and the boiled potato in the other. He rises and steps over the logs to stand across from Genevieve.

"He has your original name," Genevieve observes.

"M'lady," Galahad lets this poison drip over his tongue, "honored to --"

Galahad kneels at her side, attempting at some form of gallantry, but Genevieve won't allow him to bow his head. She reaches for his chin with a finger and takes in his features in the flickering light of the campfire. She has never seen a more breathtakingly beautiful man. His long hair frames the delicate bones of his face and his eyelashes are longer than any woman's. She supposes he resembles Lancelot, along the brow and maybe the mouth. She considers how truly enchanting his mother must be, when she's in her own form.

Lancelot grows alarmed the longer the inspection goes on. He casts a glance over his shoulder at Arthur, who nods in agreement. Enough of this. He rises and reaches Genevieve's side and takes her hand away from Galahad's face. Red blotches leave impressions of her fingers, where she clutched at him.

"Galahad will be knighted at first light," Arthur tells her gently, pulling her out of the spell. He gathers how on edge her presence has made the small group. Tristan is coiled and primed to strike if Genevieve were to attack Galahad. And Lancelot is actually blanching as he soaks in the tense reunion of his family. Arthur makes a hasty decision.

He raises his voice so that all can hear his next announcement. It will upset the men who have squired with him since they were boys, but Galahad's talk of peace and unity and love has had an impact on him. Genevieve is like a daughter to him. Lancelot as dear as a son. And he must preserve the sanctity of his court against this disruption, as much as he welcomes it.

"And Galahad will seek the Grail after his knighthood feast," Arthur announces. "He is the One we have been waiting for -- our true grail keeper."

Lancelot understands why Arthur gave his firstborn this coveted mission, but still, it pains him. Knights the lands over have considered a trip to the Wasteland the highest order of quests. With all the battles they have fought recently, Arthur has not sent a knight to pursue the Grail from his court in a long time. Lancelot has expected that Gawain or himself would be selected. Genevieve looks more shocked than Lancelot does.

“Why him?” Geneviere snaps. She can’t even look at Galahad. She turns her back on him and Galahad is all but forgotten as the knights gather around their King to hear him out. Arthur senses the dissension, not only with Geneviere and Lancelot, but in his rank and file. He steps closer to the fire and gathers everyone around to explain his decision.

Galahad is still on one knee and he can hear his name being bandied around. Mentions of his purity, despite the lustful parties being thrown at his mother’s court. Of course, more talk of the magic and deception that were used to conceive him in the first place. This is old hat to Galahad. He rises to his feet with a sigh and is relieved to see that Tristan has remained at his side.

His jaw aches where Geneviere had gripped it and his hands are dirty from the dinner. But what consumes him is how quickly his life keeps changing. Just as he was getting used to one thing – following in his father’s footsteps – it changes. And he is bereft at the thought of leaving Tristan behind. The ground feels unsteady under his feet.

He sways and would have collapsed in a heap if Tristan hadn’t caught him. Tristan lowers him onto a log and verifies that no one has seen the would-be knight who has been assigned to retrieve the Grail almost faint.

Lancelot and the knights are indeed too busy claiming their right to the mission to notice. Tristan glances between the group and Galahad. Galahad is pale and trembling. Tristan throws Lancelot’s forgotten cloak over him.

Technically, Galahad should be spending the night, alone, in prayer to pass the test that would guarantee his knighthood. But he has traveled long distances over two days and battled on top of it. “You must rest,” Tristan declares. Galahad protests weakly. He knows the rules he should follow, but the Round Table has commandeered the sacred fire where he would remain in prayer, and truthfully, he wants to retreat to a place where he can despair in private about his prospects. Even if all went well tomorrow, it inevitably means he will never see his beloved again.

He leans on Tristan, who guides him away from the bickering and hostility that seem to follow him everywhere. He is exhausted and Tristan is so warm. The emotional whirlwind of meeting his family after such a long estrangement, not to mention the carnage at Martin Mere, has taken its toll. Without any warning, Galahad blacks out.

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Out of the darkness, Galahad swipes at the smoke smoldering by flaming arrows sunk in the peat. He crawls on his hands and knees on a battlefield by a lake that mirrors the sky. Something about the land tells him it’s not the same lake as Martin Mere. The flags that whip in the wind are purple and the crest outlines a snake eating a man. Galahad hurries away from the small fires engulfing the ground and walks over the dead and dying, passing the familiar

entrance of a castle he had once raced out of. He recognizes this place. He's outside of King Hannibal's castle.

The land is covered in a thick moss and lush gardens. Less than a decade ago, its beauty was once the envy of all the kingdoms, near and far. But war had reached Hannibal's doorstep, as it would for anyone who supported Arthur and his vision of a united kingdom.

King Will rides his stallion hard towards the lake, bringing needed reinforcements from the Highlands. He wades his horse in the water as his men begin to flank the enemy in a surprise attack. Arrows sail across the lake and rain into the enemy lines like a heavy downpour. With Will's support, King Hannibal is able to finish off the last of the fleeing invaders wielding his axe.

Hannibal makes his way to the lakeshore to greet Will in gratitude and brotherhood. But everywhere he looks the earth has been turned over. His gardens are wrecked. Most of his men have perished too. But his ire is up over something much more dear to him.

He has looked everywhere. Walked twice around the lake. Finally, he comes upon Galahad.

"Where is King Will?" he demands.

Galahad points to the riderless horse wading in the water and realizes Will's mistake. Will should not have gone in the lake. Water can be a vessel, even a home, for powerful spirits. And he may have been drawn in to the spirit and disappeared for her pleasure. Seeing the nervous stallion only supports Galahad's theory. The animal knows and senses the water spirit. Yet Hannibal twists round and round, looking for some sign of the other king.

And then the water shimmers and a wave rises in the middle of the lake. A witch emerges, her hair dry and blowing in the wind. She has the beauty of any enchantress, but her strength is something to behold. She cradles a shaky King Will in her arms as if he weighed no more than a child. Leeches cling to his pale skin, draining him a ghostly white. His head lolls back unnaturally.

The witch stands on a whirlpool that allows her to hover above Hannibal, spraying him with lakewater. Being in the clutches of this witch is driving Will mad. His eyes roll back in his head and he is foaming at the mouth. Hannibal can't bear the sight that the battle may have touched him so.

"Give him back to me," Hannibal commands.

"What will you give me for him?" the witch counters.

Hannibal looks at Galahad, and Galahad insists that he is nobody and certainly worth nothing to a witch. Especially a witch as powerful as this one. The whirlpool is forming a shield to prevent any efforts of enchantment. What little magic Galahad may remember from his childhood and his dreams would only make the situation worse for them.

"Deny that he is anything to you. You're not even related," Galahad advises.

“He is family to me,” Hannibal stresses. “As true as any treasure.”

Galahad reaches for the King’s trembling hand. He realizes how different Hannibal is here. Standing on his own two feet. Walking. A virile warrior on the battlefield. The true keeper of the Grail before his... ailment. “Don’t do this, Hannibal. She will take everything from you.”

“Let her,” Hannibal sighs.

The witch’s feet do not touch the ground, waiting for an offer to be made. Suddenly, Galahad realizes what she wants. And he suspects it will be what everyone wants – the Grail. Although that is usually resistant to magic. Over time, if the witch is as strong as Galahad believes her to be, the Grail will be less resistant to her and she will eventually make it hers. For now, she will settle for something easy.

“She’s a water demon who desires to settle her feet on your grounds and blight your land,” Galahad warns the king.

But Hannibal brushes him aside. He steps closer to the spray and raises his arms towards her. He is brought to his knees by her might.

“I beg of you,” he calls to her. “My Kingdom for my King –“

“My name is Alana,” she cries out to him. Alana’s hair flashes around her head for a moment and Galahad catches sight of the snakes crawling through it. She is an ancient spirit, perhaps the last of her kind these times will ever see. Again, Galahad is struck by his own sadness, how much he will miss the unpredictable and dark things that roam the land that can be blamed for any tragedy. It’s certainly easier than considering the great empty vastness of space. The nothingness that Galahad dreads is truly the answer to the questions that haunt any human at night.

“Alana, I beseech thee,” Hannibal is weeping. Will is dying in her arms. “My offer is true.”

“You would choose him over me,” Alana screams.

Galahad understands immediately that she must have walked on land before the battle, blessing Hannibal’s gardens with her magic, giving him free reign to her property as he saw fit and courting him to be at his side as his queen, so that peace could be brokered between her tribe and his kingdom. But instead, Hannibal had been charmed by the Scotsman, King Will, who came bearing King Arthur’s message. And Alana had lost her pride and her people in her blindness to Hannibal’s true nature.

“You betrayed me,” she roars.

Hannibal is dismissive of this. She is right to assume that his feelings for her were shallow, at best, as he seems only concerned for Will. And he would betray her again, if given the chance.

“My Kingdom for my King,” he repeats.

“Hannibal, no,” Galahad persists. “She will never give you a fair trade.” Hannibal brushes him aside, his arms extended as Alana leans down to make the exchange.

“I am all that is left of the people you have slain, who were as much of this land as you, King Hannibal,” Alana lectures him. “They crawled out of this lake and to this lake they return. And what will be restocked here you will consume in remembrance of their fate... and yours.”

The whirlpool climbs higher in the air until it shoots out like a geyser, showering them with lakewater and then turning into a bubbling fountain in the middle of the lake. Galahad can feel Alana’s spirit all around him. The slain people dotted around the lakeshore are lifted in the air by her breeze and splash to the bottom of the lake. The overturned earth is free of the dead and once again turns into a verdant paradise.

Galahad looks around him, amazed and terrified. Wiping the battlefield clear of the dead will have the polar opposite effect – it would be as if the battle never happened. No dead warriors, no battle songs. Alana’s people will never be remembered if the poets are not allowed to see the aftermath for themselves and record the history in their songs of remembrance.

Galahad hears water being coughed up. Will has landed in Hannibal’s arms, soaking wet, but alive. Hannibal frantically pulls the leeches off of Will’s puckered skin. He has choked on the last of the lakewater passing through his system, and with relief, Hannibal can tell that Will recognizes him. Hannibal runs his hands over Will’s body, his scalp, over his heart, to make sure he is indeed intact and himself. He bellows out his relief with a heavy sigh and wraps his arms tightly around Will.

Will rests his head on Hannibal’s shoulder, unsure how much longer Hannibal can take his weight on his legs, and looks back toward the lake that he was spit out of. Like Galahad, he can still sense Alana’s spirit, and together, they scan the area for the witch. She won’t be easy to find if she’s on land and this garden will be their cage as long as she lives.

Will spots her first. A thin sliver of a garden snake slithering through the mud and disappearing up the cattails and tall grass. Will tilts his head at Galahad and Galahad reaches for Hannibal’s axe that he dropped, when he was raising his arms to the sky in supplication to the witch.

Hannibal has barely moved, so consumed is he in examining Will. But Will reaches calmly for the axe and throws it at the cattail, where the snake has sprouted legs and a torso with pert breasts and a mane of silky locks. The axe severs the body in half.

Alana, the witch of the lake, the spirit of the snake people, is split in two and rears her head back unlike any human. Her scream pierces the sky for miles and contains venom that sprays forth as her head spins around.

Will has killed the taint, but the deal that Hannibal made holds. The seed that produced a paradise within his vast Kingdom turns into a Wasteland overnight. Alana’s venom catches in the wind and spreads everywhere. And when Will rises from Hannibal’s lap to celebrate the witch’s death, Hannibal cannot rise with him. His legs unable to be used again.

With Galahad's help, Will carries Hannibal back to the Grail Castle and remains at his side to care for the King who had sacrificed everything for him. Together, they watch as their courts leave to find viable land and glory. And Hannibal's people desert him, unable to farm the land or feed their families and animals. Over the years, all the two Kings have left is the Grail, and that may not even be enough, as eventually the Grail will be taken too. Some Knight will be pure enough to take it. Truthfully, Hannibal doesn't worry about that. He rues the day where his King will have reached his limit and leaves him. For in the Wasteland, Galahad knows only madness awaits.

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Galahad doesn't remember how he got into the cave or if Tristan carried him inside, but he is grateful for the shelter and the warmth. He has never slept with anyone before, let alone in their arms and it is a disorienting experience to awaken to. At once, he knows this is something missing in his life and that he will pine for the warm body when Tristan is gone. He tries to pull out of Tristan's slumbering embrace, but Tristan automatically tightens his arms around him.

Galahad stiffens, slightly claustrophobic now. Dim rays of sunlight cast a pale light into the cave and he can make out the limestone enclosing them and the gold thread of his father's cloak that drapes over their bodies. He relaxes in Tristan's arms enough to tilt his head up and really study his face without worry. This may be the last day he will see his beloved. And he wants to etch each line of his face in his memory to carry with him forever.

Soon, he finds it's not enough to simply look at him, but he has to touch. He tests if Tristan will awaken if he brushes his thumb along the tattoo on his cheek. He doesn't stir. A heavy sleeper.

Galahad's breath matches the rise and fall of Tristan's. His fingers trace along his pulse along his neck. He grows bolder, as the perfect bow shape of Tristan's lips intoxicate him. The more he stares at them, the more they speak to him. And so he leans closer and tenderly holds his lips a whisper from his. His breath courses into Galahad's lungs and he feels light-headed from sharing his air.

This must be enough. Galahad's done too much as it is. And while the man is sleeping no less. He has his purity test in less than an hour, if he's any judge of the brightening light bleeding into the cave. He hates Tristan for being unattainable to him yet so close, for tempting him, for being his unrequited. Galahad should be alone, he was meant to be alone. If anything his childhood has taught him, it is that. Otherwise, why have knowledge of this feeling if it cannot be acted on?

And then he forgives Tristan. It's not Tristan's fault that Galahad's weak and desiring companionship. It's not even a question he can pose to Tristan – do you love me? It's not possible in their lifetime. How could he have blamed his beloved for the cruelty of their age?

Tristan is perfect and has shown him nothing but kindness. Ashamed, he pulls back to turn away from Tristan's face and his movement jolts Tristan awake.

Their eyes lock and Tristan looks mortified to have caged Galahad in his arms during his slumber. He mumbles his apologies and scrambles to his feet. Galahad, much to Tristan's chagrin, has returned to one of his foul humors. It is going to be a long day.

Tristan sets aside the rocks he placed to prevent the animal returning to the home they invaded. He peeks out and catches sight of May, perched high on a pine. It is bright out and the sun has burned off any morning mist.

Tristan crawls out of the rock space and steps gingerly down the slope. Galahad silently follows him. He looks back at the cave, one last time, soaking in the loneliest but most companionable time he's ever had.

Tristan is on edge, below, unsure if he should lend a hand to guide Galahad down. Galahad slips and slides down the rock and Tristan rushes to his side.

"You sliced your face," Tristan is close enough to notice now in the light of day. But the blood is dry, the cut shallow. Tristan winces. He hates that something would mar Galahad's features. "The cut must be from last night."

"How did I get here?" Galahad has to ask. He runs his fingers along the wound, but it is already healing.

Tristan does not want to admit he carried him most of the way. At the time, Galahad didn't seem to mind. But now...

"Geneviere must've cut you," Tristan answers instead. "A most unnecessary move." It gives them both pause -- to disown violence. It makes Galahad think of the unnecessary cuts to King Hannibal by all the visiting Knights. An act that mars those Knights' quests as failures. But Tristan is addressing the cut at hand: "You must be careful around her, Galahad."

The tension from last night returns to him in a flash. Galahad audibly groans. Tristan looks back at him as they trek back to camp.

"I should've never left the convent," Galahad deadpans.

Tristan can't help but smile. "Politics and family are never easy. I don't envy you, grail keeper."

"Was Arthur serious about granting me the quest?"

Tristan hesitates. "The knights' reactions will weigh on him. Things may be different today. Be prepared for anything."

They grow into a hard silence as they reach the edge of camp. Tristan signals for him to wait. In his haste to depart, he leaves Lancelot's cloak with Galahad.

Galahad weaves around the trees, allowing time to pass. It feels like the longest he's been away from Tristan since they met and already he misses him. How will he handle their upcoming separation? He shudders at the thought.

May flies overhead, screeching in the wind. Galahad looks up and takes the signal. For all the things he's seen and done, nothing has prepared him for the wrath awaiting him at Arthur's camp.

He spies Tristan's tall form near the edge of a limestone pool formed by the lake. The knights are stripping to their loincloths and gathering in front of Arthur, preparing for their test. Galahad almost turns back to the cave, where he vows to live forever. He cannot undress in front of Tristan and have the others laugh at his nonexistent hips and flat backside. Genevieve falls into step with Galahad before he can slink back to the woods.

"Where have you been?" she probes. "You are late to your own ceremony. Don't ever keep the King waiting."

He nods and then she sees the cloak draped over his shoulders, the gold glittering in the sun. He catches her offended look.

"Where did you get this?" she pokes another finger at him. "I made this for Lancelot. Did he give this to you?"

"No, no, I'm..." he struggles to remember how he acquired the cloak. "I couldn't tell you how it came into my possession."

"You sound like a thief."

"M'lady," he starts. Then he takes the cloak off and hands it to her. "My mother likes pretty things. I promise I won't tell her about your stitchwork."

Her mouth drops open. He strides away while he still can.

And right in the direction of Arthur and his knights.

"Galahad," Arthur calls, "at last."

In the palm of his hand, Arthur holds out a white, round rock. Crystals are embedded in it and it catches the sunlight. He shows the rock to every knight before him.

"The one who is pure and ready to retrieve the Grail will be able to retrieve this stone," Arthur tells them.

He drops it into the pond. All of the knights lean over and stare at it. The water is so clear that they can see where it sits at the bottom. And it looks perfectly doable to retrieve.

Arthur takes a seat on the large boulders lining the pond. The first group of Knights dive into the water, driven by ambition and the desire to serve their King. Underwater, they can see that the bottom is covered with grey and brown stones. But Arthur's rock stands out clearly.

Swimming to the bottom turns out to be an illusion. It is deeper than expected. Gawain gets close, but looks at Lancelot above him. They need to resurface for air and they come up empty.

From there, the Knights make the attempt one at a time. Galahad holds off, already sensing defeat. He's been unpure and so his chances of grabbing the stone are slim to none. He desired his sleeping knight. He taught Will how to plow and seed his Wounded King. So goes his vow of chastity.

Tristan surfaces, also empty-handed, but feels purified by the water. "The dip will do you good," he tells Galahad, warmly.

Galahad looks toward Arthur for approval. Every one of Arthur's knights had gotten a turn. The white stone remains at the bottom. Galahad shrugs off his armor and boots, a needless weight when there is no battle. He leaves his skirt on. Let them talk about him when he's underwater.

There is silence as he slides into the pool, feet first and sinks down as the rock did. He crosses his arms across his chest and holds his breath as calmly as he can. He had never envisioned a watery death, but he will not surface without the stone. He has never been afraid to go wherever his dreams would take him. In space, there was no air to breathe and yet he floated there all night. Surely, he can manage the discomfort in real life when he has nothing left to lose.

His feet touch the rocky bottom. His throat burns, wanting to open. His mind sends him sharp warnings for his need for oxygen. Still, it is critical that he does not take that first gulp for air. He must find his rock.

He bends down, scanning the pond bed. Arthur's stone looks jagged now, its crystals shining brightly in the reflection of the water. He reaches for it and it dances out of reach.

He uses his arms to catch up with the little swimmer and it floats into his hand like a magnet. He grips it, and looks down one more time. Hopefully, this is the right white rock.

Finally, he releases the pressure building in his chest, letting the bubbles escape his nose and then the larger ones his mouth. He can't get up fast enough now. The surface is so far from reach.

The weight of the water is more than he can bear. For a second, he thinks irrationally of letting the rock go. Anything to help him reach the surface. He pushes his arms to work harder and tries to push aside the panic of needing a breath of air. He remembers he can use his legs too. He could call the witch of this lake to his aid, but it's too late for ancient calls when the Knights are making so much noise above. Water spirits prefer silence on their shores.

The surface breaks and he gulps for air. A cheer pierces the air and the clapping of the Knights, to Galahad's ears, could wake the dead. Arthur slides down from his boulder and reaches the hand that holds up the rock. And then there is silence that chills the area from the lakeshore to the foothills.

"He is the One," Arthur declares, defiant to anyone who would question him again. He stares down Lancelot and Gawain and Genevieve. He pulls the soaking boy into his arms and raises the rock up over their heads.

Galahad looks up at the cloudless sky, at how the crystals catch the sun's flare and a prism marks the faces around them. With his body pressed against Arthur's, he wants to correct him. He is a vow breaker and would rather be trapped in a limestone cave with his beloved than maintain this lie and be something he's not.

The barely-dressed Knights circle the King and his chosen One, a puddle of water dripping at Galahad's feet. A cold spell overtakes him and he shivers, showering the gathering audience. They are forced to step back.

"Galahad, son of Lancelot," Arthur begins the ceremony, looking softer at his favorite knight. Galahad wonders why he won't add Elaine's name, and silently calls out to her. Effortlessly, he allows himself to float, as he does in his dreams. His human form remains on the ground beneath him, but his spirit closes the space between Martin Mere and Cornwall.

"Elaine," he hollers out, over the clear lake and the holloway to her castle. When she doesn't answer, he corrects himself: "Mother."

She turns in her allure, her eyes fixed on his, despite the great distance. She takes one step from her castle to the edge of the clear pond and then Elaine stands among the knights and Genevieve, arranging her robes and taking her place next to Galahad. Their spirits are invisible to the group. Arthur goes on and on about Galahad's purity, making him the One to retrieve his stone and the Grail.

"He is wrong about me," Galahad explains to her. "Make him see me for who I am."

"You are more than capable of enchanting anyone," she scoffs, annoyed with him. She gives him a pointed look as he bats his innocent eyelashes. "Please," she continues to throw scorn at him, and when he will not relent, she explains that he is her son. He does not need training to enchant. His dreams will weave the magic for him if he cannot extend his power in this world. But how difficult can it be for him to cross into the land of enchantment? For some it is a twitch of the nose or a wave of the hand. For him, with his pedigree, he was born enchanted. It will come as natural to him as breathing. "How are you wrong?" she teases, twisting his words as enchantresses do. "One may be unable to attain perfection and yet still be perfect for the job," she smiles at him. "Relax, Galahad, you worry too much."

And for once, he listens to his mother. He focuses on Arthur, singing the song of the Grail Keeper. It is one of failure after failure, and still it remains hopeful that Spring will come to the Wasteland again and light will lift the darkness clinging to the castle's ashlar.

As if sensing Elaine's presence, Genevieve reaches for Lancelot's hand, trying to maintain. Lancelot, familiar yet unused to Elaine's magic, sees through the invisible veil and catches a glimpse of the thin, nearly see-through fabric that undulates near Galahad's bare feet, the shapely leg that he'd once lifted over his shoulders, a flash of a smile. He pulls away from Genevieve and joins Galahad by his side.

Arthur finishes his Grail song and places Lancelot's hand on Galahad's left shoulder. He fixes his gaze on Galahad, "You have been cleansed by these waters and have emerged victorious, to swear your oath of your knightly order and to accept my sword as your own."

Many of the Knights gasp. For Arthur to be without a sword means he cannot fight, and if he cannot fight, then he must go to the warring tribes and call for a truce, at least until Galahad returns from his mission – if he returns from his mission. It is a stunning moment and the meaning is not lost on Tristan.

"Bend to me," Arthur orders.

Galahad takes to bended knee and bows his head.

Arthur unsheathes his sword and sets the flat of the blade along Galahad's right shoulder while Lancelot keeps his hand on the left. Gawain exchanges a look with Lancelot. He's never seen the Knight shiver before, let alone cry. This is his son and there could be no higher honor than to see him be knighted for his own valor and purity. Lancelot is overcome.

"What are your duties as a knight, O Galahad," asks Arthur.

"Be loyal of hands and mouth," Galahad answers formally. "Be humble and courteous wherever thou go. Serve every man as best you may. Seek the fellowship of good men; harken to their words and remember them. And if men speak with disrespect to any woman, show by gracious words that it pleaseth you not, and depart."

He glances over at Elaine, and beyond her, his beloved. He is pleased that they look proud.

"The office of the knight," Galahad continues, "is to promote faith in the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings and protect those who seek to worship in the light."

Arthur raises his sword in the air and the Knights of the Round Table reach out their right hand towards the sword.

"Let us pray as one," Arthur commands. "Let us pray for this Knight's sword, which was made for me and which I give freely to Knight Galahad to aid his quest for the Grail."

Galahad almost is lifted off his toes by the energy he feels in the silence of the extended healing circle of hands around him. His mother, unbeknownst to Arthur, has reached out to touch the sword and kisses the tip. She drapes herself over Arthur's arm, soaking in the sight of Lancelot for the first time in eighteen years.

And then the voices repeat the ancient medieval prayer for a Knight's sword: "Hearken we beseech Thee, O King, to our prayers, and deign to bless the right hand of Thy Majesty this sword which Thy servant desires to be girded, that it may be a defense of churches, widows, orphans, and all Thy servants against the scourge of pagans, that it may be the terror and dread of all evil-doers, and that it may be just in both attack and defense."

Elaine is the first to kiss Galahad, running her hands through his curls to tease his drying hair and clutch at his earlobes. She smiles against his mouth, her teeth scratching his lip and nose

and chin. Forever the tease. And then Arthur bends his mouth to his for a chaste kiss. Lancelot and Geneviere. Bors. Gawain. Gareth. Lamorak. Geraint. Kay. And finally Tristan approaches.

He considers the fire that is brewing in his heart. Should he be wanton and playful like his mother? Will he know that every sense is tingling in anticipation? Can he accept this exchange as a loyal and courteous gesture, as he had the others?

Tristan arrives in front of Galahad and bends to brush his lips lightly over his. But Galahad parts his lips at the last moment and his eyes flicker closed. He runs his hand down Tristan's beard and tugs at one of his braids. Elaine catches this, impressed. Her boy is truly fearless and magical.

The others ignore Galahad and Tristan, cloaked in her enchantment, and Arthur wraps up the ceremony early, in an absent-minded way. Later, Arthur will wonder why he forgot to go over the Grail quest with Galahad and why he suddenly tells Tristan to accompany Galahad to the Wasteland.

Galahad exchanges his breath for Tristan's for the second time that day and then finally releases him from the deepening kiss. Tristan focuses on him, confused and shaken. He holds Tristan's gaze so that his meaning is clear: This was no mistake. There is no such thing as accidents. It was meant to be -- even the treetops sung Tristan's name from on high, even if their love was born out of pagan seed -- so, why pretend? His heart wants what his heart wants. And he will use everything in his arsenal, pagan or otherwise, to keep his beloved near.

The Three Masks

Chapter Summary

Tristan is more traditional than Galahad had expected. The Two Kings must face the truth about their relationship. And the Grail finds a new grail keeper.

Chapter Notes

Tags to note -- implied sexual content in magic and all things, and actual sex, though not graphic.

Galahad's mare gallops at top speed for the Grail Castle along the well-worn path. Despite leaving Martin Mere at an early hour, barely lingering over the feast prepared for the knighthood ceremony, it feels as if they barely gain on the Grail Castle by mid-day. Even the time seems distorted in the Wasteland, caught somewhere before dusk or dawn. The skies seem to be constantly wavering on the cusp of a delicate dance with darkness.

Galahad leads the way. After all, he has visited the two Kings in his dream state on several occasions. The fungus from the witches' venom floats in the air and clings to everything.

Galahad left his armor at the bank of the pond. He is dressed in his Roman robes with the leather hilt that carries Arthur's infamous sword. And Tristan, too, is with him, following on his warhorse. May floats overhead, closer to the clouds.

The wind has spread news of their quest, and as they approach the edge of the Wasteland, the townspeople emerge to line the road to the Grail Castle. The two knights will be amongst the Crawfords and the Zellers and the Prices, who have attempted the same mission before them. Maybe this song will be different.

Gifts are offered and held out for them. Flowers tossed. Wenches flounce and fling themselves, offering to serve as bait for the Fisher King. Galahad is forced to slow to appear courteous, per his oath. Tristan has no tolerance for the unruly crowds or their baskets of meat, since the Fisher King does not hunt.

Being forced to slow down and actually talk to the people brings Galahad to an uncomfortable conclusion. They know what ails the kings. It's the Knights who come through, not taking the evidence into account. The insistence of the people that the Kings' secret is out in the open, that the wound is deeply personal and tied to a forbidden love, only adds onto the tension that is building within Tristan towards Galahad.

The fungus floats in the air like snow and Galahad lets the horses rest, feeding them from the gift baskets. Tristan has kept his distance, uneasy, until May lands, wanting dinner too.

Tristan watches Galahad feed her the chunks of meat meant for the Fisher King.

“Did you enchant me, back at the camp?” Tristan blurts out.

“Aye,” Galahad answers easily.

Tristan swallows, his head finally clearing. Galahad’s forthrightness is off-putting.

“Why?”

Galahad shrugs, stroking the head of the hawk. He hopes the look he holds with Tristan conveys all the things he cannot express. May his love light his eyes and whisper his plea to be gentle to his heart in matters of rejection. Tristan looks away first, too pained not to have understood.

“The people back in town,” Galahad sidesteps that topic for another, “think that one of the Kings suffers from a castration.”

“His thigh wound,” Tristan expands, nodding.

“Not his thigh, castration. We should not ignore the evidence: The inability to hunt. The attempts to heal by stabbing the king with a sword or a lance. And both kings have been attended only by all male attendants. The reason all the other knights have failed is because they have come to punish the kings, to continue their pain, for being perceived as effeminate.”

Tristan frowns, processing Galahad’s interpretation.

“We cannot judge them, Tristan, for the life they have shared,” Galahad sighs. “At least I won’t and I’m hoping – yes, I enchanted Arthur to release you to me because I’m hoping you won’t judge them either.”

“How can I not judge,” Tristan trails off. They have not even begun to discuss the kiss they shared. Nor dealt with the looks that Galahad gives him as if he won’t notice. He is not oblivious. “What are you asking of me to do, Galahad? Say it plainly.”

“To set aside the ideal and face the rea – “ Galahad is interrupted by the sight of a beautiful castle glimmering in the distance. He is shocked at how blatant the enchantment is. No wonder this quest has been perceived by the townspeople as a trap.

The Grail Castle gates and doors are flung open and the trumpet sounds. Tristan hears it too, his body responsive to the call.

“I must use magic, if you expect me to heal the King,” Galahad presses on. “It is expected, Tristan. Magic against magic.”

“Magic? They rule under Arthur’s oath – “

“This will be the end of magic if we secure the Grail. I would never have to use it again. There would be no need to. If you would just trust me,” Galahad pleads.

Tristan is distracted by the captivating vision of the Grail Castle, falling under a new enchantment so easily. “You are a Knight now,” Tristan reminds him, “and duty-bound to your oath. You will plunge whatever sword they give you into the king, as they have asked every other knight to do.”

Galahad lowers his head in obedience. “Yes, m’lord.”

Galahad watches Tristan mount his stallion and ride up the road. He pets May’s head again and prays for guidance.

Galahad reaches the castle doors at Tristan’s side and the Fisher King Will awaits them, welcoming them inside. He is in his finest robes and greets the knights with a chaste kiss. For a brief second, Galahad detects that Will recognizes him.

“You’re from Arthur’s court,” Will observes. “It has been too long since he’s sent one of his knights.”

Tristan is charmed. Will can be a gracious host. He is pleased that Galahad has brought a partner, because now he will prepare a feast. He explains how he normally does not extend an invitation to a lone Knight, as they are too eager to report back to their courts. Tristan soaks in the story, but Galahad sees through the lie. They do not bother charming a lone Knight, because it would be a waste on a righteous man, searching for his own glory instead of what's best for King Hannibal. Two knights may be more amenable to a real attempt at conversation and therefore healing.

In the grand dining hall, King Hannibal waits for them at the head of the table and describes that they’ll feast on fish and dried figs and loaves of brown bread and fresh butter. A simple meal, but to Galahad's ears, it sounds divine. As the meal is being prepared to be brought out, Will asks the Knights if they’d like to see their treasure. Tristan is delighted at the prospect of touching the Grail. But Galahad reaches out and touches Tristan’s arm.

“My beloved,” Galahad smiles at him. Tristan pulls back, surprised at the truth, again, in Galahad's words. Galahad soothes him, by rubbing his arm. He does not want Tristan to eat the fish or touch the Grail. If he does, he will be lost to the madness of the Castle as all the others who have fled from it. “Aren’t I treasure enough for thee?”

Tristan is speechless. And mortified that Galahad would do this in front of such an esteemed court.

King Hannibal blinks, amused by such a public display of affection. In their distraction, Galahad is able to see what is really laid out before them as the feast procession moves through the room and is set on the table. A bleeding lance, a candelabrum and a grail. Separately, Will places a sword closest to them. His movement momentarily breaks the enchantment, and the ruins of the castle are apparent and it’s clear that the servants and whatever court attendants would be coming in and out of the halls are all gone. Beside him, Tristan is frowning, confused.

“May I ask you something, King Will?” Galahad addresses him, as he takes his seat and the enchantment resumes as before. Galahad uses all of his magic to persuade him to tell the truth.

“If you must,” Will manages to speak without irritation, although he is working very hard to appear calm.

“How would you describe the dishes of this banquet?”

King Hannibal looks between them, delicately. “You are the only one who has ever asked about this procession. Why is that? Aren’t you a knight from Arthur’s court?”

Galahad indicates Tristan with a nod of his head. “He is the only one I take orders from. My King, as it were.”

That elicits a sharp intake of breath from Will. And a nod of understanding and respect from Hannibal. They understand each other. Tristan is on the verge of putting a halt to these shenanigans, when Galahad’s magic finally takes hold and he spies the instruments that have been used to reopen Hannibal’s wound.

“How long have you been together?” Hannibal ventures to ask, plainly.

“Only since last night,” Galahad reveals, reaching out to touch Tristan’s braid.

“Newlyweds,” Hannibal pronounces, delighted.

“And what of you two?” Galahad inquires of their status. Hannibal is not offended by the question, and in a delicate, coded way, conveys that he and Will have never been lovers and have lived all these years as brothers.

“But you’re living a lie,” counters Galahad. Will jumps to his feet before Hannibal reminds him that Galahad is a guest in their home. And offering to heal him. With great effort, Will returns to his seat.

“Arthur allows you to carry on like this at his court?” Hannibal teases.

“We have remained hidden,” Galahad admits. “But that life is a slow death. If I return, I will not sacrifice who I am for a seat at the Round Table. Whom does the grail serve, if not the grail keeper?”

That takes the smirk off of Hannibal’s face. Even Will goes silent. It is a bold proposition, that makes them question how they have been living. Galahad, feeling empowered, rises to his full height in his enchantment, his head extending as high as the castle ceiling and his multiple arms waving over the weapons before them.

“I will not punish you for what you are, King Hannibal, for it is within me too,” Galahad thunders. “I was told, by you, King Will, in a dream, that I only had to be sure to ask the healing question. And so I will not use a weapon, but words to heal Thy King.”

Hannibal swallows, prepared for anything but this. Galahad approaches, his giant steps echoing through the hall.

Galahad kneels at Hannibal's side and they are face to face with each other. Will has drawn his sword to protect his king and Tristan leaps over the table to prevent him from interrupting Galahad.

"Maimed by the witch Alana, O Broken King, Hannibal," Galahad calls, "bring forth Thy true self and join us in Thy appeal."

This magic power of names breaks the first mask that Hannibal presents to any knight of the realm. Galahad's dream was true then. Alana had waited and made allowances in hopes to be Hannibal's queen and threw a jealous fit when Will accidentally stepped into her lakewaters. But there are no such things as accidents in the olde ways. Something in their union needed to be brought out to the light. This basic truth starts the careful undoing of King Hannibal. As Galahad needs him to admit that his love is a weakness or makes him unwell or even, by the look of Will, unwelcome.

"How do you know this – " Will hisses, struggling against Tristan. If Galahad knows how Hannibal was wounded, then they are under his enchantment now. Galahad beckons Tristan to let Will go and beckons Will over. He joins the Kings' hands together. He will need to call both their spirit guardians and their ancestors to break Alana's spell.

"If I'm to heal your most precious King, I will need your charms too," Galahad tells Will with a smile. Tristan hangs back as Galahad motions his enchantment for Will to finally share his first kiss with Hannibal.

Another mask is shed by Hannibal, at Will's touch. At the press of his lips and the flick of his tongue, the Fisher King's kiss brings its own healing. Galahad looks away and catches Tristan staring at the two Kings. He is pressed against the wall, shaken at the carnal sight and their clear need and passion for each other.

Galahad rewards their bold move by bringing them back to reality. Their healer is in his true form, shrinking to his less intimidating size and stature. Galahad is merely an eighteen-year-old man-child, scared that he may fail at this fateful juncture. He realizes this approach comes with a significant risk. By healing the two Kings and seeing what spurred their isolation and ostracizing, he fears he may remind Tristan of what awaits them, should Tristan decide to love him in return.

"There's only one question that matters, O Healing King," Galahad fishes for the truth within the triangulation of energy that flows among them. "Only one quest of importance... Can you forgive yourself?"

The last mask is shed. Hannibal reveals his true face, twisted from years of carrying shame and guilt for desiring the man at his side. Tears pour down his cheeks. It is as if the earth has cracked and opened and everything that he has contained inside is allowed to pour out.

This emotional flood flows to Will, who wraps his arms around his king to comfort him.

“I’ve always been here, Hannibal,” Will soothes. “I’m here now.”

Galahad allows them their moment and turns away. He stares at the table of weapons and has to decide which is the true grail. One of these objects is better than the others.

Galahad is spent from puncturing the resistance he met from the kings. He has to remind himself that he’s so close now. He has come all this way, after so many harsh years of wandering. He cannot fail to release the witch’s hold on the King’s legs and the Wasteland.

Tristan catches on to what Galahad’s trial is and decides he can at least be of some assistance with this matter. This is in his wheelhouse. He pries his back off the wall and crosses to the table. He can see the weapons clearly now and is tempted to touch the grail, but suspects it’s not the Holy One. After years of being in the battlefield, the only thing that he’s regarded as sacred is the blood that spills from a wound. He conveys as much to Galahad.

The blood on the lance has to be Hannibal’s. He approaches the couple, who are acquainting themselves with soft caresses and languid looks. For Hannibal to notice Galahad in this moment confirms that Galahad selected the right weapon.

Will presses closer to Hannibal’s side, protective. “No more,” he swears off the way Hannibal has dealt with his pain in the past. Galahad promises he won’t use the lance in the usual way.

Galahad wipes the blood from the lance, draining every drop it has with a firm squeeze of his hand along the shaft, and smears it over Hannibal’s lap. The blood is scalding and Hannibal jumps to his feet. He is so furious, he doesn’t realize he’s standing and moving around. Will gazes up at him, amazed.

It sinks in for Hannibal that he is able to walk again. He grasps Galahad and lifts him up.

“You did it, healer,” Hannibal cries.

Galahad protests that he’s not done. The Wasteland has yet to lift out of its spell. But Hannibal assures him it took a day for the curse to hold and it may take a night to release its grip. He suggests they retire and relax for the remainder of the night. Galahad has to admit that he’s drained and exhausted from using every nerve and muscle to see this quest through.

The ruins of the castle have not changed and Will is embarrassed that only one tower is livable. He places the knights in the room next to Hannibal’s, which is the least cold of all the accommodations in the castle. Will, a king, brings in the wood to light in their fireplace. There are no pelts or furs, as Will has not hunted since he arrived at the castle. The blankets are taken from the peasants and their gift giving.

Tristan reassures Will that they are grateful for his hospitality. Before Will takes his leave, he squeezes Galahad’s arm. “Thank you,” he says. His sincerity means everything to Galahad. It gives him strength to continue on to hopefully the last stage. And the hardest.

Galahad is left alone with Tristan, who looks away. It is awkward between them and has been all day. Tristan clearly is not comfortable with the thought of being with a man, of seeing a

man with another man. And it doesn't help that next door, they can hear the moans and lovemaking of the kings. And their room is silent, bereft even, of affection.

The bed sits cold and empty between them. Tristan remains standing by the window. Outside, the Wasteland remains the same.

"Will your enchantment hold over the witch's?" Tristan asks.

Galahad can hear that everything is working for King Hannibal from the sound of Will's sharp cries and then he understands what Tristan means. "I may need to sleep for that part to come to me," Galahad admits. Although sleep may be difficult to come by with the amount of noise the kings are making.

Tristan remains standing, as if he's keeping guard. Galahad removes his robe and sinks under the peasant blankets. "Tristan," he insists. "If you don't sleep with me, they will know they were manipulated."

Fuming, Tristan removes his boots and lies on the edge of the bed. "If you had any honor, you would have upheld your oath."

Galahad considers the cracks in the ceiling and the disrepair the castle has fallen into. How will it work to restore the Wasteland? How will he repair the gulf with Tristan now?

"Please, take the grail back to Arthur and sing of my failure," Galahad huffs.

And that's how Galahad sleeps with anger at his night in the Grail Castle.

*

Galahad stands in the middle of the Wasteland. Dead trees and dead dirt as far as the eye can see.

He summons the mists of Avalon to use as his enchantment to cleanse the land of its toxins from the witch's venom.

The fog comes and spreads like a thick paste through the Wasteland. It even slips inside the castle, making the air hazy and oppressive.

Galahad moves through the dilapidated rooms to retrieve the object he has quested for. The lance stands against the wall, and he attaches it next to Arthur's – his – sword.

He moves to the Kings' tower, to insure that the magic is holding. Quietly, he swings open King Hannibal's door, where the kings are still making up for lost time. Galahad admires the love that flows between them and can't imagine how they had refrained from unleashing the passion they had for each other all those years. But as he taught them, all is forgiven.

Next, he strides over to what must have been King Will's old room, where Tristan remains. He reaches his side and takes his hand. His sleeping knight. His beloved. Maybe one day Tristan too will be ready to be loved and will find him.

"I will always love you," Galahad tells him. He knows that this will be the last enchantment he will ever spin. After the grail releases its gifts, there will be little need for olde magic in the New Country. And for people like him, caught between two worlds, it will be difficult to find a place to dwell where he will be welcomed. He foresees another long, difficult journey ahead.

He leans down and glances Tristan's mouth with a farewell kiss.

*

Tristan awakens to the sun breaking through the clouds. The brightness is almost too bright. It's unbearable.

He covers his eyes with his arm and leans back with a groan. The fire has died out, but even the room is now too warm. It's like a furnace.

Gasping, Tristan jumps to his feet and opens up the window to let in some air. And that's when he sees the Wasteland has been transformed. A light shade of green covers the dirt now. And he hears birdsong. The waters on the lake no longer look brackish but calm and clear. Even the trees are sprouting buds.

The castle still looks worse for wear, but stones can be replaced and walls can be fixed. In the distance, the towns bordering the Wasteland are ringing their church bells in jubilation. Springtime is upon Hannibal's kingdom once again.

Tristan rushes to the bed to share the good news with Galahad and finds the bed empty. On what was Galahad's side, the fake grail remains for Tristan to take home to Arthur.

Galahad is gone.

*

Galahad journeys to Gaul in a fortnight, bearing the Holy Grail for Bedelia. She has returned to her father's house to restore his legacy as the keeper of the grail. She has been waiting for Galahad as she has fulfilled her promise of eighteen years and now it's time for Galahad to fulfill his.

As soon as Galahad crosses the threshold of Frederick's castle, her father reappears. Just as she had suspected, Galahad, with the help of the Grail, can grant the gift of life and death. And as long as she believed, there was a chance Frederick was alive. Galahad made it so. Bedelia has never been happier in her life.

Galahad regales Frederick of tales of battle and knighthood and kings. How his daughter, Elaine, is spoken of as the mother of the grail keeper, the queen of the prophecy maker. The family's name will go down in the songbooks.

He does not mention Tristan right away. Maybe he will later. He won't say it out of bitterness or spite. But out of fear if he did, he would crack and fall and not be able to put himself back together again.

Galahad hands the Grail over to Frederick for safekeeping and then goes to Bedelia as he used to when he was a boy, and asks her which errands she would like him to complete. He will remain with her, for as long as she will allow.

*

He is out in the fields tending to the lambs when the horses pull in.

Bedelia has long since left Castle Chilton to follow her husband to his family's estate. Her sons now are old enough to begin their training for knighthood. And of course they will be taught by the very best.

Frederick hangs on. Still spry in his old age. He doesn't need much to make him happy now. His family has righted their name and the Grail is safe in his hands.

Galahad washes his hands before he goes into the house to greet their guests. From the amount of horses, it must be a hunting party, lost. He takes another glimpse at the crest branding the various decorations on the horses and the purple flags.

He recognizes that snake. The crest of the man in the serpent's clutches. In his shock, he throws up against a stonewall. It is like the earth has opened up before him and jolted him out of a dark stupor. Galahad returns to the well and dips water over his face and sloshes his mouth clear. He smoothes his plain peasant's frock with shaking hands and straightens his posture to appear confident.

Galahad rounds the corner of the hall and sees that Frederick already sits among their guests.

King Hannibal stands when he sees Galahad. He crosses to the healer, still fit and walking despite the years. Hannibal throws his arms around him and firmly plants a kiss on Galahad's cheek. King Will does not even give him a chance to speak before Galahad finds himself engulfed in another hug.

Hannibal is a gentleman around Will, holding his chair out for him and squeezing his hand as he jokes about how he found balance in his fishing. Their affection is open and the passion they feel towards the other is still burning bright. Galahad is happy for them.

He is introduced to their various attendants and lords of their court and surmises that things have very much improved for them over the past decade or so. Frederick arranges for wine and cheese to be brought out to hear of their riches and the bounty that returned to the fallow fields of their Wasteland.

In the very back of the entourage, Galahad spies a familiar face. Tristan, who had tamed the lands of England when she was wilde and full of magic. A warrior. A knight. And his beloved.

He is older now. He no longer wears the trappings of Arthur's court nor keeps his silver hair in braids. A plain black leather tunic fits over the sharp angles of his frame. His hair is cut in the shaggy English style that has taken over the Continent.

Like Elaine with Lancelot at his knighting ceremony, Galahad is content to just watch him from afar and soak in how the years have changed him. He survived Arthur's court and the resistors to bring religion out of the woods and into the church. And it's possible he has remained unmarried – or even unattached. And he is here. So near but so far. How Galahad's eyes feast upon him. And O, King of Kings, how he aches.

Galahad is never one to settle with his theories for long. He wants to test them.

He makes his way across the room and takes a closer look. His eyesight is not what it used to be and perhaps it's not Tristan. On the days he's gone to market, he sees Tristan in every vendor or peasant who could pass for him.

The distinct markings are there along his cheek. The scratches that are fading on his arm where May's talons missed the leather cuffs. It is his beloved, returned to him.

"Tristan," he calls, haltingly.

They exhale at the same time, after realizing they were holding their breath. And then share a nervous laugh.

"I should apologize for this long and unnecessary hiatus," Tristan begins his speech, but Galahad interrupts him.

"Why the apology? All has already been forgiven," Galahad squeezes his hand. After ten years, he can't even remember why they parted. So why dwell on it? "You are here with me now and it's all I could ask for."

"I wasn't sure I would be welcomed," Tristan says, low and unsteady.

"You needn't worry about that. Who else would I be expecting?" Galahad is overjoyed.

"There has only been you," admits Tristan.

He brings Galahad's hand up to his cheek. And then his lips to his lips. They only break because of the teasing and ribbing from King Hannibal's court.

But for the rest of the day, and all their remaining days thereafter, Galahad and Tristan do not leave each other's side. They endured enough time in their own self-imposed Wasteland and they remain grateful for every moment they share together. While the songs about them mainly speak of their quests and battles, some of the bards later braved stories about their love, that changed the course of history.

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